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1968/02/28

CABINET MEETING

OF

FEBRUARY 28, 1968

A G E N D A

CABINET MEETING OF FEBRUARY 28, 1968

I. VIETNAM REPORT

General Earle Wheeler
Philip Habib 15 minutes

II. REPORT ON GOVERNORS CONFERENCE

Price Daniel 10 minutes

III. ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL BUDGET

Charles Zwick 10 minutes

IV. TONKIN GULF CHARGES

Secretary McNamara 10 minutes

V. STATUS OF LEGISLATION

Larry O'Brien
Barefoot Sanders
Mike Manatos 5 minutes

TOTAL TIME: 50 minutes

A T T E N D A N C E

CABINET MEETING OF FEBRUARY 28, 1968

MEMBERS OF CABINET

Vice President Humphrey
Secretary Rusk
Ambassador Goldberg
Secretary Fowler
Secretary McNamara
Deputy Attorney General Christopher
Postmaster General O'Brien
Secretary Boyd

Secretary Udall
Secretary Freeman or
Secretary Schnittker
Secretary Trowbridge
Secretary Wirtz
Secretary Gardner
Secretary Weaver

OTHERS

General Earle Wheeler
Philip Habib
Price Daniel

Charles Zwick
Charles Maguire
Barefoot Sanders
Mike Manatos

CONFIDENTIAL

CABINET MEETING OF FEBRUARY 28, 1968

The President convened the meeting at 12:36 p.m. He invited General Wheeler to report on his visit to Vietnam last week.

GENERAL WHEELER (12:36 - 12:47 pm)

General Wheeler used a map and chart presentation. He referred to them in reporting that Hanoi had undertaken "new and heavy attacks throughout the length and breadth of the country since January The Tet Offensive was clearly very carefully planned and the most important of the enemy's efforts.... They are relying on surprise attacks and violated their own truce to pull it off. Our Intelligence did forecast these attacks. General Westmoreland redeployed his forces to counter every unit moving on Saigon. We reinforced the whole Saigon area.

"How many enemy troops were involved? We put the figure at somewhere near 67,000 combat troops and 17,000 men and boys impressed into these kinds of operations. It is a powerful nation-wide assault. It is aimed at wrecking the machinery of Government, destroying the ARVN, weakening or destroying the United States control system. They seem to have counted on general uprisings and sizeable ARVN defections. They hope to seize and hold major cities. But they failed in these objectives. They even failed in Hue.

"There are some things different about this offensive. It may be the start of what they call their 'new war.' They are not withdrawing as they have in the past. When repulsed, they are hanging in there, hanging around the major population centers like Saigon, Hue and Danang. The idea seems to be to put pressure on the Government and the population, to keep on harassing areas in the hope of starting a general uprising.

"How do they hope to do that? By rumors, mortar attacks, infiltration and probing attacks, making all the trouble and causing all the fear that they can.

"The enemy has been hurt but is still determined to press selected initiatives in the North and South. The 9th and 5th Viet Cong Divisions were chopped up. Their 7th Division is probably still OK, pretty fresh. It wasn't committed to the Tet Offensive and there are four divisions around Danang that are also fresh. They have the capacity, apparently, to keep on pressing at Hue, too.

Believed to be an
administrative meeting
By IDE On 2/12/80

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"So we have some pluses and minuses to add up.

"On the plus side, the enemy suffered severe losses. They are operating out in the hinterland now and will be forced to try to find new recruits.

"There is a threat so long as they keep hanging around Saigon and the other major population centers. The South Vietnamese Government can't afford another Tet. Neither can they go out and hunt the enemy down. They are confined to a defensive strategy. Westmoreland is trying to beef up the local police now and support them with mobile forces. I think we must do this, or else the cities will be strangled.

"We have been taking prisoners and documents. One enemy document reviewing the Tet Offensive admitted failure in the plans to create an uprising and defeat the ARVN. These were primary objectives. The captured documents also show heavy losses and the enemy's need to recruit more if they hope to continue the offensive.

"The document also referred to 'new actions.' One of them is to avoid attacks on United States units because it has proven too costly. Attacks are to be continued and stepped up on the South Vietnamese Government and the ARVN forces. The Victory Day forecasts have been stretched out into the future, beyond the so-called winter-spring campaign.

"It is imperative that we now go out after the Viet Cong forces that are trying to strangle the cities. A static defense will not do the job. It invites further attack. It is essential that we get our own and the South Vietnamese forces out into the countryside."

The President

Asked if South Vietnam was drafting 19-year-olds?

General Wheeler

"Yes, sir. As of March, and 18-year-olds will be drafted in May."

The President

"What percentage of the South Vietnamese population is fighting compared to the United States?"

General Wheeler

"They are at 10% mobilization and we have 3-1/2%. They also have a planned increase of 65,000 in their own Armed Forces."

The President (12:47 - 12:48 pm)

Invited Secretary Rusk to comment on the political implications of the Tet Offensive.

SECRETARY RUSK (12:48 - 12:53 pm)

Secretary Rusk characterized the Tet Offensive as "an outright rejection of the San Antonio formula. These people spurn any condition, they reject the President's condition that they do not take advantage of a bombing pause...."

"We tried twice more this week. But they are now involved in 'a fight and negotiate' strategy that is very similar to what they did with the French in 1953 and 1954. They want to divert attention from the battlefield with talks. Hanoi knew its Tet Offensive plans far in advance. They were laying them while putting out feelers and talk of peace."

The President invited Philip Habib, Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, to comment.

Mr. Habib (12:53 - 12:55 pm)

Mr. Habib said that his views also represented those of Ambassador Bunker.

"No one out there belittles the scope of the North Vietnamese effort. But it is clear that they failed in their key objective -- to wreck the Government.

"There are minuses, as General Wheeler said. North Vietnam showed its power to the people of South Vietnam and the people of the world.

"It was a great psychological shock for the South Vietnamese. They are fearful and you can understand why, that there will be more of this, future attacks...."

The President (12:55 - 1:01 pm)

"The big problem is the impression we make with the public.... We have to be careful about statements like Westmoreland's when he came back and said that he saw 'light at the end of the tunnel.' Now we have the shock of this Tet Offensive.

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"Ho Chi Minh never got elected to anything.... He is like Hitler in many ways.... But we, the President and the Cabinet, are called murderers and they never say anything about Mr. Ho. The signs are all over here. They all say 'Stop the War,' but you never see any of them over there. Then he launches the Tet attack, breaks the truce and escalates by firing on 44 cities, all at the time that we are offering a bombing pause.

"It is like the country lawyer who made the greatest speech of his life but they electrocuted his client. We are like that now....

"We have got to guard against over-optimism now. We have got all these proposals.... From the Javitses and the Gavins, Fulbright and the Kennedy boys and Romney and the rest.

"I want the State Department and the military, Bob McNamara and Dean Rusk to look at all these proposals, get me a paper on these opinions and options.... Analyze them and let me know how we can escalate peace.

"We have our shirttails out all around the world.... We have people out traveling, hunting for peace.... Just when you think there may be some progress and you draw circles around Hanoi and Haiphong, just at that time you're answered by a cannon shot.

"So what are all these options? Let's look at all these opinions, all the new, fresh, imaginative proposals and explore them so we know what the options are, how we can escalate peace."

The President asked if the Cabinet had any questions for Mr. Habib. There being none, the President invited Governor Daniel to report on the Governors' Conference schedule for 9:00 a.m. tomorrow.

GOVERNOR DANIEL (1:01 - 1:12 p.m.)

The Governor reported that this Conference would be different from past meetings in that "the Governors asked for this one."

"The Governors have also selected their own subjects for discussion. It appears that crime and Vietnam are the two major topics on their minds.

"Forty-nine Governors were expected. Absentees would be Governors Wallace, Reagan, Connally, and Aspinall."

(Minutes incomplete. The President requested Mr. Maguire to bring in some papers from the outer office.)

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The President invited Budget Director Zwick to give an analysis of the social budget.

DIRECTOR ZWICK (1:12 -)

Director Zwick based his presentation on the charts attached at Tab A.

The President

"I sometimes think that we are lonely voices speaking in the wind. Galbraith says liberalism died with President Kennedy. The Vice President wrote him and pointed out what this Administration has done, what this social budget means to the American people. I want to be sure that every Cabinet member knows what it means too. You must know it and you must talk about it....

"I hope that we can always set aside this second Wednesday for Cabinet meetings.... holding them every two weeks.... I want to welcome Warren Christopher here today.

"It is a very sad day for me when three Cabinet officers leave. None were fired. I would never fire any of them and I will miss all of them. It is a very sad hour for me to say goodbye to Bob McNamara, John Gardner and Sandy Trowbridge. But if we say goodbye to them as Cabinet members, we can say hello to them as private citizens who will continue to work with us as strongly and effectively on the outside as they have on the inside."

Minutes by Charles Maguire